



King County Mental Health Chemical Abuse and Dependency Services Division 2002 Briefing Paper

SUICIDE

BACKGROUND:

Suicide is the eleventh leading cause of death for all Americans. It is the third leading cause of death for young people aged 15-24. Washington state ranked tenth highest in the United States in its rate of suicides in 1999, with a rate of 14.2 suicides per 100,000 population, compared to the national rate of 10.7. The impact of suicide is further magnified by the needs of persons who attempt suicide but do not die, requiring emergency health care and rehabilitation.

Each death by suicide should be viewed as potentially preventable. Over 90% of suicide victims have mental illnesses or substance use disorders for which treatment can be highly effective. Unfortunately, persons contemplating suicide may not know that treatment can help, may not know how to seek services, or may be unable to access treatment due to a lack of health insurance or discriminatory health insurance practices. Persons in contact with a suicidal person, even health care professionals, may not recognize the seriousness of the risk or know how to intervene. Both the suicidal person and those in contact with him may be inhibited by the stigma that can surround mental illness in general and suicide in particular.

In King County, MHCADSD annually analyzes the public mental health system's experience with suicide in the clients we serve. Over the last five years, the county medical examiner has reported an average of 190 deaths by suicide a year, giving a rate of about 11.2 suicides per 100,000 population for our county. Unfortunately, only an average of 12 of the 190 persons is receiving ongoing outpatient services in our system at the time of their deaths (compared to the 18,000 in this treatment system at any one time). A small additional number have received recent services in our crisis system, available to all citizens of the county.

ISSUES/CHALLENGES:

More effort must occur to identify suicidal persons in our community. Persons at risk of suicide need easy access to health care professionals who can rapidly assess their needs and refer them to appropriate treatment. Protected environments, such as hospital settings, must be available when needed. Persons at risk of suicide often require mental illness and/or substance use disorder treatment. Such treatment requires health insurance and public funding that allows care that is on par with the treatment of other illnesses.

RECOMMENDATION/LEGISLATIVE ACTION:

King County MHCADSD will continue to support efforts to enhance the public awareness of mental illness, substance use disorders, and suicide risk recognition. These efforts will extend to all King County residents.

King County will continue its continuum of crisis services available to all persons in the county, including the 24-hour crisis phone line, treatment supports for the Crisis Triage Unit, involuntary treatment, and crisis diversion resources. We will work to enhance the awareness of these services in the general population. We will also continue to provide mental illness and substance use disorder voluntary inpatient, outpatient and residential treatment for low-income persons.